

Algae costly to Lake Erie tourism industry

Lakeside leaders question blooms' effect on business



By **David Patch** | BLADE STAFF WRITER

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Widespread algae blooms in Lake Erie during the summer have Port Clinton and other lakeside community and business leaders worried about how the algae will affect tourism, which generates \$12.9 billion annually in Ohio's eight lakefront counties.

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GYPSUM, Ohio — While Lakeside Chautauqua offers a wide range of events and recreational activities, one need look no further than its name to grasp

Lake Erie's significance to the eastern Ottawa County resort and cultural center.

But two years of widespread algal blooms in the lake during the summer now have the 143-year-old community contemplating building a pool to ensure that residents and guests can still go swimming when Lake Erie's water turns foul.

"If the lake is in this much jeopardy, we've got to have this healthy alternative," Kevin Sibbring, Lakeside's president and chief executive officer, said following a news conference Thursday at the Lake Erie Shores and Islands tourism bureau in Portage Township.

Lakeside closed off lake access about a dozen times during the summer, often during weekends, and paid to have its water samples tested by the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, Mr. Sibbring said.

He estimated the cost of a proposed "pool and wellness complex" at between \$2 million and \$4 million.

A task force has been established to study options with an eye toward raising money throughout 2016 and having a center ready for use by Memorial Day, 2017, he said.

"That water experience is critical" to keeping the 125,000 people who visit Lakeside each summer as property owners, hotel guests, or cottage renters coming back, he said.

Lakeside's potential expense is just one of the effects cited Thursday, when business leaders from the Port Clinton area described the impacts of Lake Erie's algae crisis.

And most of the presentations weren't concerned with whether the water is safe to drink.

Dave Spangler, owner of Dr. Bugs Charters at Harris Harbor in Carroll Township, said the blue-green cyanobacterial algae that bloom in midsummer displace beneficial algae that are food for minnows and other baitfish that sustain western Lake Erie's sport walleye fishery.

"If the fish have nothing to eat, just like you or I, they're going to go someplace else where there is something to eat," Mr. Spangler said.

The top question his staff used to answer from potential fishing-charter customers, he said, was "How's the fishing?" But now it's "How bad is the algae?"

Mr. Spangler said his business was down 17 percent this season.

Paul Pacholski, president of the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association and proprietor of Erie Hopper Sportfishing Charters, said his traffic was off by a quarter, costing him between \$12,000 and \$15,000 in net income.

But the charter boats' losses, while painful to their operators, are "just the tip of the iceberg" of potential harm to northern Ohio's tourism economy, Mr. Pacholski said.

When businesses directly tied to the lake lose customers, he and others said, the effect ripples through other businesses those firms buy goods or services from, and it also hurts their employees and the businesses those employees patronize.

Larry Fletcher, executive director of Lake Erie Shores and Islands, said tourism generates \$12.9 billion annually in Ohio's eight lakefront counties.

While many area businesses haven't suffered immediately because of the algal blooms, Mr. Fletcher said, the degree to which visitors this year asked questions about the problem causes "great concern about next year."

Kelly Frey, sanitary engineer at the Ottawa County Regional Water Treatment Plant, said levels of microcystin toxin, the algae component that caused Toledo to issue a do-not-drink order for parts of three days last year, remained relatively low this year despite a "huge biomass" of algae in the lake.

But the cost of testing and treating the water soared because of the threat, Mr. Frey said.

Several speakers said they appreciate Ohio officials' leadership role in tackling the algae problem, but said those efforts have to be continuous, rather than ebbing away once the water cools and the algae die off in the fall.

They called in particular for continuing, nonpartisan support for Ohio Senate Bills 1 and 150, measures to regulate use of agricultural chemicals that are believed to be a main contributor to the problem.

"Keep the politics out of it," Mr. Spangler said after pulling out a bottle of cloudy, olive-tinted water from inside the lectern.

Citing the colors most commonly associated with the Democratic and Republican parties, he continued: "The lake doesn't know blue from red. It just doesn't want to be green."

<http://www.toledoblade.com/local/2015/10/09/Algae-costly-to-tourism-industry.html>

Contact David Patch at: dpatch@theblade.com or 419-724-6094.